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Ethnic Foods as Unprepared Materials and as Cuisines in a Culture-based Development Project in Southwest China

In contemporary China, urban consumers often imagine that the unprepared foods produced in rural areas (often less developed and occupied by ethnic minorities) are pollution free, healthy, and environmentally friendly. During a recent culture-based development project in southwest China, villagers in several ethnic minority villages proposed that local foods could act as cultural resources for rural development. However, instead of highlighting the ethnic affiliation of their unprepared foods, villagers insisted on marketing their cuisines (cooked or prepared foods) under the new brand name of *nongjiale* (“farmers’ joy”). My argument is that the ethnic titles of these minority groups have been closely associated with negative connotations and so-called “unusual cuisines” (*yiwèi*). This association cannot be easily removed. It is already rooted in public discourse and present throughout historical documents. However, the rebranding of restaurants as *nongjiale* has brought local villagers a new, positive marketing strategy. In urban and mainstream Chinese cultural areas, *nongjiale* connotes that food is organic, nutritious, ecological, and part of a return to nature.

KEYWORDS: ethnic minority food—*nongjiale* restaurants—“unusual cuisines” (*yiwèi*)—southwest China

THIS STUDY is based on fieldwork for the final evaluation of the United Nation's China Culture and Development Partnership Framework (CCDPF) project, which took place in five ethnic minority villages (belonging to Miao, Dong, De'ang, and Jingpo) in Guizhou and Yunnan in 2011. It is also based on my observations over fifteen years of how ethnic minorities' foods are marketed in China. The CCDPF project, carried out in southwest China (mainly in the Guizhou and Yunnan provinces) from 2008–2011, was one of the four Joint Programs in China funded by the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F). This fund was established by the Spanish government and the UN in 2006. In responding to the "Thematic Window on Culture and Development" opened under the Spanish MDG Achievement Fund, CCDPF aimed to integrate culture into development, specifically in selected marginalized areas inhabited by ethnic minorities in China.

Contemporary Chinese urban consumers often imagine that foods produced in less-developed areas, especially mountain villages belonging to ethnic minorities, are ecological and pollution-free. Accordingly, the CCDPF project accepted villagers' suggestions and identified local foods in participating villages as cultural resources for rural development. During the project, one initiative involved growing organic foods for the city markets. This entailed several participating villages produce many kinds of vegetables, wild plants, local varieties of rice, fish raised in paddies, and other produce. Often labeled as "pollution-free vegetables" (*wugong-bai shucai*) or "ecological foods" (*shengtai shipin*), these products were considered valuable by the urban Chinese I met during my fieldwork.

At the beginning of the project, the participating villagers also proposed that they market their cuisine (cooked food) under the new brand name *nongjiale* ("farmers' joy") restaurants (CAI 2009, 23–24). With the essential support of CCDPF, several villages have made great progress in their *nongjiale* initiatives. When I visited a De'ang village and conducted interviews regarding the achievements and difficulties encountered since the project was launched under CCDPF, villagers demonstrated their ability to run *nongjiale* restaurants according to brand guidelines by inviting visitors from outside for a dinner party of local dishes.

Some urban consumers I met during my 2011 fieldwork showed great interest in the unprocessed local food originating from the villages, praising it as "pollution-

free” or “real ecological food.” However, when they had a chance to eat the food in the villages, some of them expressed different attitudes and ideas. One urban elite (an official from a provincial capital city) told me that he usually turned down any invitation to dinner in Dong villages, since Dong cuisine normally contained a dish of raw fish. According to him, as a cuisine this dish was unhygienic because the fish were raised in paddies, the local cesspool for human waste. This imagined connection between the raw fish and human waste brought feelings of disgust to consumers. However, this gentleman did accept an invitation to a dinner party where he ate at a villager-run restaurant in an ethnic De’ang village. I asked him why De’ang cuisine in this village was acceptable to him, and he explained that this restaurant was better than those found in Dong villages since it had completed the training process required to create a *nongjiale* restaurant. Another consumer, a middle-aged urbanite, commented after a meal at the *nongjiale* restaurant of the De’ang village: “This is the first time I have eaten De’ang food in the last forty years.” He mentioned that De’ang people were famous for their “stinky foods,” one of the famous “unusual cuisines” (*yimei*) of minorities in Yunnan province. According to him, in the past it seemed that the De’ang did not eat meat until the meat reeked and became rotten. This ethnic group, as such, used to be called the “stinky Benglong.”¹

During my field research I became curious about urban consumers’ different ideas regarding ethnic foods as unprepared (that is, some ethnic minority foods are raw, but at the same time “prepared”) and as prepared cuisines. Additionally, I wanted to know why villagers chose “*nongjiale*,” rather than their ethnic group names to market their restaurants. My argument is that the ethnic titles of certain minority groups have been closely associated with “unusual cuisines” and have had negative connotations. This association cannot be easily removed; it is already rooted in public discourse and has the support of many historical documents and recordings.

Replacing the meaning of “ethnicity” with that of “farming” when naming local cuisines of marginalized populations is important as it helps create the potential to add new, positive meanings to previously marginalized foods. If this change does not occur, these local foods will remain firmly associated with, and limited by, a series of systematized negative meanings which have accumulated throughout Chinese history and have been reinforced by the construction of ethnicity in the Chinese mass media in recent decades.

MARKETING MARGINAL FOODS FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Foods and foodways serve as vehicles for meanings of all kinds (MINTZ 2001, 274) and can help express and construct individual and group identities, such as interpersonal relations or membership in a social class or ethnic group (CHEUNG 2001, 83; LEFFERTS 2005). Anthropologists such as Mary DOUGLAS (1972) and LEVI-STRAUSS (1983) have long explored the cultural meanings of

foods. One type of food can accumulate different meanings in different contexts (YAN 2005; MINTZ 1985). As an important part of foodscapes, restaurants also have overwhelmingly symbolic functions (SHELTON 1990; SWISLOCKI 2009) and can shape customers' thinking and behavior (SHELTON 1990). Restaurants not only provide a window for understanding existing social meanings/codes, social relations, identities, and power structures, but also have the ability to transform food meanings (YAN 2005, 81; OHNUKI-TIERNEY 1999). As strong carriers and transformers of meaning, both foods and restaurants have been used to highlight or blur existing identity boundaries (YAN 2005, 81; WATSON 1987). Accordingly, the manipulation of food meanings is essential to marketing marginalized ethnic foods (FINNIS 2012; CHARLES 2002; TAN 2001).²

Anthropologists have noted there are generally two ways for people to deal with ethnic foods: one can either highlight or hide the ethnic affiliation of foods. The first has been mainly used for political ends, such as establishing a connection with an ethnic group by consuming its distinctive or representative foods (for example, *sinonggi*, the sago flour in Indonesia; see UTARI 2012). The second has occurred in the marketing of ethnic foods to mainstream consumers, as demonstrated in case studies of avocados in the U.S. (CHARLES 2002), alpaca meat in Peru (MARKOWITZ 2012), and minor millets in India (FINNIS 2012a). There have also been cases in which the local foods of ethnic areas have been marketed specifically as ethnic foods, and the marketing has resulted in no sustainable market (WU 2003).

These studies have shown that the symbolic meanings associated with ethnic foods matter and that, as FINNIS says, "the success of an attempt to take a marginal food into wider contexts may therefore depend on whether its symbolic status is effectively repositioned" (2012b, 9). Hiding the ethnic association of food has been one of the key strategies used in such repositioning, such as for avocados, minor millets, and alpaca meat in the U.S., India, and Peru respectively. Existing scholarship has shown that a number of things need to be done in order to help marginal foods change meanings: rebranding requires development organizations to help reimagine or reinterpret the foods, repack and standardize food and cuisines, arrange ritualistic events, and promote positive discourse in the media.

Strategies for reimagining or reinterpreting may include taking advantage of modern science to highlight the nutritional value of foods; rewriting the history of foods by blurring their ethnic roots and highlighting images of elites consuming them; and stressing the relationships between ecological conservation, health, and eating marginal foods. In order to implement such a strategy the upper classes should be targeted first, and then middle-class consumers will accept the marketed foods. Those with authority, or celebrities, could be linked to the foods. One should avoid any connection with native or local groups but rather publicize images of elite people consuming this food. For repackaging and standardizing the marginal foods and cuisines, it is necessary to adopt certain practices from the food and restaurant industries, such as regulated meal structures and recipes. This kind of standardization helps customers accept foods more easily (SMART 2003). Also, ritual-like events and positive discourse in the media serve to publicize and

legitimize the changing status and meaning of foods (CHARLES 2002). A specific association or organization for the marketing of marginal foods can help with marketing in all the above-mentioned aspects, but is particularly useful in providing lasting effectiveness in the form of advertising and generating repetitive mass discourses. An organization's support can make leaflets or brochures explaining the nutritional value of the foods more trustworthy, and can help stores open and succeed in elite communities (CHARLES 2002; FINNIS 2012a).³ In summary, a food's negative meanings should be replaced with positive and appealing ones and state more about the advantages and values of the food while blotting out its history (MARKOWITZ 2012, 40). However, the peculiar politics (especially the current issues surrounding polluted foods), history, and culture of the ethnic minorities in southwest China has made the marketing of their local foods even more complicated and unique than the American and Peruvian examples.

ETHNIC FOODS AND MARGINALITY IN THE CHINESE CULTURAL CONTEXT

China has paid unusual attention to the construction of ethnicity, beginning in the 1950s, when the new communist government sought to organize the huge population using an ethnic approach (BLUM 2001). The construction of ethnicity was a national focus again in the early 1980s, when certain Han areas struggled to apply for recognition as non-Han, minority regions (MACKERRAS 1994). From the 1990s to the present, tourism, especially heritage tourism and ethnic tourism, has been heavily promoted by the central government (OAKES 1998; 2013). Finally, constructions of ethnicity became important when urban Chinese consumers realized that ethnic minorities living in remote and "backward" highlands were producers of their safe and pollution-free foods (for more on the problems of food safety, see YAN 2012).

For ethnic minorities, their cultural status is both beneficial and harmful to their participation in the tourism market. There have been certain beneficial policies for ethnic minorities (HARRELL 1995), but many unfavorable connotations associated with being an ethnic minority in the Chinese context still remain. For example, poverty and backwardness are frequently associated with ethnic minorities in the eyes of the elite, and these relationships are based both on historical materials and the Marxist theory of social development that is still present in contemporary China (HARRELL 1995). Through the perspective of Chinese elites, the Chinese population may appear to be divided into two: the advanced Han Chinese, and the backward and less-developed non-Han minorities (MCKHANN 1995, 41; BLUM 2001; GLADNEY 1994). According to the structural "grammars of identity" approach pioneered by BAUMANN and GINGRICH (2004), the Chinese attitude towards ethnicity construction and regulation constitutes an integration between the modalities of "orientalization" and "segmentation" (BAUMANN and GINGRICH 2004, x). The first grammar of identity/alterity, Orientalization, which focuses only on purely negative mirror images, is particularly expressed in attitudes such



FIGURE 1. A dining room of the *nongjiale* in De'ang village (all photos by author).

FIGURE 2. A tea house of the *nongjiale* in De'ang village.



FIGURE 3. A dish of local wild vegetables in the *nongjiale* in De'ang village.

as “what is good in us is lacking in them” and “what is lacking in us is still present in them” (BAUMANN and GINGRICH 2004, x), while aspects of shared culture are often interpreted as being Han-ified (HARRELL 2001, 5), namely “what is good in them is borrowed from us.”

Food and foodways, unfortunately, have been particularly taken as evidence that prove minorities’ otherness (backwardness, primitiveness, and exoticism) in China since the 1950s. Foods and cuisines are typically implicated as important evidence in representations of the backwardness of minorities. BLUM (2001), for instance, demonstrates how representations of backwardness, marginality, or otherness of minorities draw on traditional foods, together with indigenous costumes and singing-dancing routines often derived from ritual as symbolic resources in formulating and circulating negative stereotypes.

Specifically, foods and foodways have been used to construct otherness in southwest China in the following iterations: foodstuffs (for example, numerous wild animals and plants,⁴ meal structure (such as the blurred *fan-cai* boundary),⁵ cooking (for example, using bamboo tubes to cook rice, as noted in FISKESJO 1999), eating style (for example, the long-table feast described in FISKESJO 2010), drinking (for example, rice beer or toasting with songs; see FISKESJO 2010), as well as notions of “unusual cuisines” and “disgusting” foods and practices of food avoidance⁶ by the Han (for example, of “stinky” foods). In this way, a series of unusual foods and foodways of minorities have been charted in the Chinese knowledge system (for more on food stereotypes, see DE GARINE 2001), a process with historical roots that has been traced (for example, see WU 1991).

Marginalized ethnic foods in China have an additional peculiarity: in addition to enduring elite discourses about the unusual cuisines of southern minorities throughout history, minorities intentionally created cuisines—in addition to some foodways—that had the effect of intimidating or repulsing outsiders. From a majority Han Chinese point of view, the intimidating nature of minority cuisines and foodways might even provide evidence for the argument proposed by MUEGLER (2001) that local minorities (highlanders) have been involved in a strategy of keeping the state at the margins of local society. This argument goes along with SCOTT’s (2009) idea that minority culture can be a means for escaping the state. Following VAN SCHENDEL (2002), Scott studied what he called Zomia, the large, mountainous areas of Southeast Asia, southwest China, and parts of Central and South Asia. MUEGLER (2001) studied the ethnic community of the Luoluopo (a part of the Yi nationality) in Yunnan and how the people used a system of territorial organization known in Chinese as *huotou*⁷ to keep outside power and the influences of the state at bay, beyond the margins of the local society. The *huotou* system may be considered a “passive” way for locals to deal with outside influences, while the more general processes of migration, flight, and subterfuge which Scott studied might be regarded as more “active” ones.⁸

In Chinese society, farmers are considered “a vulnerable group” (*ruoshi qunti*) and ethnic minorities symbolically belong to “backward groups.” Ethnic minorities remain the most marginal social groups in present-day China. This may be because

Communist Chinese ideologies based on Marxist-Leninist social theory taught that the present-day ethnic minorities of China must belong to less developed stages on the ladder of social and economic evolution. Conversely, Han farmers, like Han urbanites, must belong to the most developed. GLADNEY (1994), along with many others, has provided a detailed analysis of the long-standing Chinese dichotomy between the “civilized” majority Han population, and the “backward,” non-Han, minorities. Minorities are associated with many stereotypes that have developed in both historical and modern times. These stereotypes can be traced back to very ancient times when imperial dynasties sought to civilize “primitive” groups based on Confucian principles. In the communist era these traditional stereotypes were reinforced by Marxist theories of social evolution derived in part from Stalinism (HARRELL 1995). This historico-political context informs today’s mass discourses related to ethnic issues in China, where historical stereotypes serve as evidence and contemporary Chinese Marxism acts as theoretical support. Therefore, while Han farmers may be seen as more marginal than Han urbanites, they are still assumed to be more advanced than ethnic minorities on the ladder of social evolution endorsed by official policies and discourse.

While facing stereotypes constructed by mainstream culture, the ethnic minorities living in southwest China (including the provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, belonging to what VAN SCHENDEL (2002) and SCOTT (2009) have called the Zomia area) have also been actively engaged in forming a local food system that might help them escape from the state’s tax collection and control. This includes practices such as the Yao/Mien’s avoidance of growing cereal crops like wet rice (SCOTT 2009, 194). Aside from choosing appropriate crops (“bad” crops in the eyes of state officials), some minorities have also developed special cuisines that can be enjoyed by themselves but at the same time can be presented as quite distasteful to outsiders, who might be officials or soldiers sent by the state.

Stereotypes developed by mainstream society and the specific and distinctive cuisines developed by the southwest minorities have both contributed to a compelling ideological discourse about backward, barbarian minorities, who enjoy a seemingly unbelievable system of foods. It is this ideology which in turn has aroused strong interest among scholars studying the ethnic minorities in southwest China. Foods have been regularly and repetitively referred to in the scholarly literature concerning ethnic minorities (WU 1991). These studies and other kinds of mass discourse, including in the mass media, have reconfirmed the “disgusting” features of minority foods while simultaneously providing solid evidence for portrayals of the minorities’ marginality.

Therefore, the peculiarity of minority foods in southwest China is that both elites and commoners in mainstream Chinese society have written and talked extensively about these intimidating foods, while at the same time many of the minorities have actively created and maintained unusual cuisines which they know to be repulsive or off-putting to others. It is almost as if the two processes are in collusion, and indeed, if we follow Scott’s argument, this is what we should assume. That is, distinctive foods and foodways have been maintained not just

because they are locally available and traditionally enjoyed, but also because it has been recognized that they are not generally enjoyed by non-minority peoples.

Wu Yongzhang has made a detailed list of these unusual foods and foodways in minority ethnic areas of southwest China (WU 1991, 174–222). Unusual foods and foodways have been recorded and disseminated by Chinese scholars in different historical periods, especially the Tang dynasty (618–907), Song dynasty (960–1279), Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing dynasty (1644–1911). For example, many recorded the use of primitive utensils for cooking and eating (the records often declared that the “barbarians” ate raw foods and had no fire or metal cooking utensils), unusual protein resources (hill turtles, bamboo rats, snakes, monkeys, mice, rats, locusts, wasps, eels, dragonflies, ants, frogs, centipedes, silver fish, grasshoppers, dog, earthworms, butterflies, cicadas, and so on), unusual dishes (sauce made of ant eggs, thick soup made of the internal organs of goats or cattle, soupy material formed from the digested grasses in the cattle’s stomach, newborn baby rats mixed with honey, fish preserved with salt and rice liquor for many years, meat preserved for many years in a thick soup made of mixed buckwheat ash and sorghum gruel), unusual seasonings (the ashes of certain plants to replace salt), unusual staples (starch made from wild fern, kudzu, or palm),⁹ and unusual drinking styles (drinking a lot, forced toasting, and drinking through their noses). These works by scholars and officials throughout Chinese history spread such information among the literati and elites and widely influenced peoples’ perceptions.¹⁰

In short, this is a historic food list that would surely intimidate many mainstream consumers. With today’s ethnic tourism in southwest China, if these “authentic” ethnic foods were provided to mainstream customers there would be many complaints. I observed this occurring on tourist trip to Jinghong, the homeland of the Dai minority people (related to the Thai and Lao of Thailand and Laos) in the fall of 2000.

UNUSUAL CUISINES

The first meal we had after arriving at Jinghong was at a restaurant named “Dai Customary Foods” (*Dai jia fengwei canguan*). After the meal, many tourists complained to the tour guide that it had not been a proper dinner and these foods did not make them feel really full. The structure of the meal was quite different from what most people thought of as dinner, and so were the dishes. On the table there were over ten dishes, most of them fresh, raw, cold, or pickled (no “stinky foods”). For example, the fern fiddlehead dish was cold and raw; one wild herb smelled like purple perilla and was also raw; the pickled cabbage was cold; raw cucumber slices were dressed in sauce; and one dish was sticky rice within a hollowed pineapple.¹¹ Fern fiddlehead and the wild herb called “fragrant vegetable” (*xiang cai*, which smells like purple perilla), both of which were set in large-sized containers, were conspicuous on the table. I picked up some fiddlehead and asked the tour guide about the plant. The guide answered that it was a wild fern (*ye jue*) and a typical Dai food (*Dai jia cai*), explaining:

These Dai foods (ethnic foods, *Dai jia cai*) are definitely unfit for you. Most of these foods are wild, raw, cold, and sticky. But you are coming here to see the ethnic customs, right? So it would be a pity if you did not try these foods. It is true that you won't feel full. Besides, in this restaurant the cooking methods for these foods are somewhat modified. As for the real Dai foods made by common Dai people in the countryside, I bet few tourists can eat them. Don't worry! The rest of the meals in this prefecture during your travels will all be *normal* foods.¹²

Stereotypes of southwestern Chinese minorities have accumulated over a long historical period and are still rooted so firmly in popular discourse that discussions related to ethnic minorities frequently tend to go towards notions of backwardness and abnormal foodways. Due to the negative meanings and connotations ethnic foods carry, mainstream consumers cannot readily accept them. Therefore, in marketing these foods, major work needs to be done on their symbolic meanings and associations.

For minorities in southwest China, we have noted that both outsiders and locals seem to have been engaged in constructing particular images of the unusual, or even disgusting, aspects of their foods. It is easy to understand why the elite of mainstream Chinese society kept recording and communicating ideas and images about these distinctive foods, just as the Spaniards did for indigenous alpaca and the elites in India did for millet. However, it is also important to understand the agency and creativity of local minorities in constructing distinctive cuisines. James Scott's portrayals of "escape cultures" in Zomia are useful in this inquiry. While choosing certain crops that avoided the tax-collecting activities of the state, and using mobile economies which avoided registration and census activities, it might be that some ethnic minorities in China have also used their culinary skills to make their cuisines, especially protein-based foods, enjoyable for themselves but extremely distasteful for others.¹³ From the evidence, I would suggest that this has indeed been the case.

In China, meanings associated with ethnicity are quite different from meanings associated with farming and agriculture. Ethnic minority foods throughout history have been targeted by Chinese elites with contempt and denunciation. This occurred not only because the foods were felt to be unusual and disgusting, but also because the nature of their production and use made the imposition of state control difficult to implement and maintain, especially in mountainous areas where most of the southern ethnic minorities lived. In stark contrast to these time-worn images, the joys of farmhouses (heritage), and farmers' well-being, have recently been actively promoted by state authorities as vital national economic and social projects. The meanings associated with farming, farmers, and agriculture, have been uniformly positive. Although farmers also belong to a vulnerable group in modern Chinese society, their marginality is different from that of the ethnic minorities. Farmers are assumed to be on the same level of social evolution as mainstream groups, while minorities are assumed to be at different, and inferior, evolutionary stages. Furthermore, the wide appearance of food safety problems in

China during the first two decades of this century (YAN 2012) has coincided with farmers' foods (grown organically for their own consumption) becoming more expensive and valued than foods commonly sold to mainstream consumers in city markets. Of course, many ethnic minorities are also farmers; the point here is the very different symbolic meanings attached respectively to images of farmers, usually mainstream Han Chinese, and ethnic minorities, usually shifting cultivators or pastoralists.

NONGJIALE RESTAURANTS

Villagers involved in the CCDPF project have proposed *nongjiale* restaurants; in fact, they were the first need listed by people in several villages when UN researchers conducted their baseline surveys and needs assessment (CAI 2009, 23–24). *Nongjiale* is the general name for a new type of tourism which has emerged in China. It consists of a number of activities, such as eating farmers' traditional foods, enjoying the rural scenery and local customs, experiencing rural work (fishing, planting crops, harvesting fruits, or processing foods), and viewing old farming tools and equipment. Tourists may board in rural homes, play games of chess or mahjong, and so on. Among these activities, eating local foods is the most important; many people tend to associate *nongjiale* tourism with *nongjiale* restaurants specifically.¹⁴

Nongjiale enterprises have become increasingly popular in China since the 1990s. There has been some controversy about where the *nongjiale* movement first emerged. One county in Zhejiang province claimed to have started the first *nongjiale* establishment in China in 1986. However, Nongke village, a village in Pi county of Sichuan province, was eventually officially recognized as the earliest *nongjiale* destination in China; the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) awarded the village the title of “The birthplace of China's *nongjiale*,” and estimated that *nongjiale* began to become popular in the mid-1980s (WANG and QIU 2012). By the end of 2011, the number of *nongjiale* sites in China had reached 1.5 million. On average, the yearly income from *nongjiale* tourism nationwide amounts to 150 billion yuan from 60 million tourists. There were 6,609 *nongjiale* restaurants by March 2010 in the province of Yunnan alone (WANG and QIU 2012).

Nongjiale is an example of the successful marketing of marginal foods in contemporary China. Through businesses legitimated by the *nongjiale* movement, farmers in many areas have been able to market their local foods and cuisines effectively, even when they used to be marginalized and ignored by mainstream urban consumers. *Nongjiale* institutions in China have applied all the general strategies detailed above for marketing marginal foods: they have set up specific organizations; reimagine, reinterpret, repackage, and standardize foods and cuisines; and promote positive and repetitive mass discourses.

The *nongjiale* phenomenon is relatively new and may have been adapted from the overseas leisure tourism industry,¹⁵ which has attracted urbanites to spend their holidays in rural areas, enjoying farmers' foods and “natural” lifestyles, for

some time. Around the mid-1990s, *nongjiale* tourism had begun to occur in places like the mountainous areas of Enshi, in central China. There, for instance, I was told that *nongjiale* customers were welcome to drink the local liquor and then smash the liquor bowl (to show off their great capacity for drinking); drinking and smashing bowls became one of the early markers of this new business in Enshi. Since those early years, the business has become ever more successful. There are now special sites for *nongjiale* in suburbs on the outskirts of cities like Shanghai,¹⁶ Nanchang,¹⁷ and Wuhan.¹⁸ Powers pushing this business forwards include the government at various levels (including the national, provincial, and county levels) and the China National Tourism Administration (or local tourism bureaus). Provincial tourism bureaus have a special fund for promoting *nongjiale* initiatives; villagers who are interested in setting up *nongjiale* sites can apply for financial support.

The *nongjiale* movement is well organized. Many local areas have formed their own *nongjiale* associations, and the provincial Tourism Bureau provides backing for these enterprises by using its authority to both sanction them and regulate their management and administration. Farmers with *nongjiale* establishments have to take part in relevant training programs, pass examinations and inspections, and follow regulations and specified standards. Supported directly by the CCDPF project introduced above, both the De'ang village in Yunnan and a Dong minority village in Guizhou have set up their own tourism associations, through which they have also been able to establish their own *nongjiale* sites. There are also *nongjiale* associations at the county, prefectural, and provincial levels.

My own studies and observations in Shanghai, and in the provinces of Hubei, Jiangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan led me to conclude that *nongjiale* tourism has primarily provided a new platform for reimagining the meanings of marginal foods. *Nongjiale* has always had positive connotations. First of all, many believe that it has Western origins and thus has been adopted from advanced or “civilized” societies. Moreover, Chinese authorities, including government organizations, have endorsed *nongjiale* tourism. It is targeted primarily at urbanites who want a temporary escape from “modern” life to enjoy a more “natural” environment. Tourists believe that the foods provided in *nongjiale* restaurants are grown by farmers in their own fields with traditional methods. The foods and cultivation practices are seen as green, organic, appealing, and healthy. In this respect, the foods sold in these establishments are believed to be superior to those in supermarkets or even urban farmers’ markets.

In sum, farmers’ traditional foods have had their meanings completely transformed in recent decades, and are no longer marginal compared to urban fare.¹⁹ In contemporary China, food safety crises have been widely reported; furthermore, a recent scandal about “special supplies” (*tegong*) of healthy and wholesome foods for high status government units has further reinforced the people’s trust in traditionally produced foods. In this way, the turn to *nongjiale* cuisine and business has been helped by context. Many middle-class urban consumers have made a habit of spending holidays in *nongjiale* areas to refresh both their bodies and their minds.

LINKING ETHNIC CUISINES TO *NONGJIALE* IN CCDPF VILLAGES

From November 2008 to November 2011, eight UN agencies cooperated with eight Chinese ministries and several academic and civil society organizations. The project goal, writ large, was culture and development integration for ethnic minorities in China, and this was to be achieved primarily by addressing issues in education, health, and cultural resources. The project was focused on “strengthening the local capacity of the ethnic minorities for protecting and utilizing their cultural resources” and “promoting cultural-based economic growth, including tourism and ethnic crafts sector development” (TAPP and WU 2011, 1).

Interestingly, local foods which food anthropologists would regard as one of the most important cultural resources (MARKOWITZ 2012) were not part of the original project design (CAI 2009). During the baseline surveys and needs assessments in 2008, project officials found that three out of four villages in Yunnan listed the construction of *nongjiale* restaurants as their first need (CAI 2009, 23–24). *Nongjiale* practices were regarded by villagers in Yunnan and Guizhou as an important means of marketing their foods and developing local tourism.

I visited several CCDPF villages, such as Wudong (Miao), Yintan (Dong), and Chudonggua (De’ang), where villagers had been trained by the local government to run *nongjiale* restaurants and inns. I visited the villagers’ households, kitchens, guest rooms, vegetable gardens, and talked with villagers about their businesses. New *nongjiale* establishments, as mentioned above, have to put their employees through training programs, pass various examinations and inspections, follow specific regulations, and meet the requisite standards. Three training programs for *nongjiale* management had been implemented in Guiyang, Kunming, and Guilin for villages impacted by the CCDPF project. Certificates were awarded to trainees from various ethnic minority villages as they underwent a process aimed at standardizing their local food products.

CCDPF villages in southwest China have focused on several major things. They have sought to make their ethnic foods part of *nongjiale* tourism, develop infrastructure to overcome geographical distance, and combat disadvantageous cultural meanings by accumulating positive symbolic capital. Beyond the official guidelines for the project, tourist associations and exchange platforms have been established between local communities, civil society organizations, and local governments by the CCDPF. These connections have helped villagers introduce their local foods into the national *nongjiale* movement. In terms of food meanings, the CCDPF project in southwestern China has been a strong force in the ongoing process of dissociating various activities and performances related to minority foods from their former meanings. For instance, the CCDPF program has introduced new technical knowledge and terminology from contemporary nutritional and ecological sciences. This knowledge works in combination with traditional economic practices, wisdom, and agricultural heritage. In addition to connections with tourism associations, training programs including standardizing the taste of the food, meal structures, and restaurant management have been held with the support of local

governments. In this process, the actual history of ethnic foods has faded. Traditional ritualistic events have been taken advantage of, and new symbolic sites have been constructed. Both of these processes have helped legitimize the new meanings of ethnic minority foods.²⁰

Villages have often created advertisements and written descriptions of their communities based on the models of *nongjiale* tourism established elsewhere in agricultural China. For example, Wudong village (a Miao village in Guizhou) has been introduced to potential clients as follows:

It is far from the urban noise and hustle and bustle, neither severely cold in winter nor extremely hot in summer, and the villagers are simple and hospitable. It is like an eternal land.²¹

The inscribed stone tablet introducing tourists to the De'ang village in Yunnan province has a similar tone, and makes no mention of ethnic De'ang affiliations:

Our ancestors migrated to this place in 1781, led by Zhao Shuaibao. The village was named Mandengzhong, meaning Red Tree in the Dai language. Later, villagers did not get used to this name and neither was it known to outsiders. In order to keep their connections with the outside, villagers used "Chudonggua," the place name of their old village, from which they had migrated, as the name for the new site. In the earliest times, there were over ten households, over sixty people, and the houses were built of grass while the roads were only narrow trails. In August 2009, the village had 225 households and 921 people, with an average income per person of 1,650 yuan, and houses built of bricks and tiles. The old red tree, already 230 years old, grows even more exuberant. We specially erected this tablet to commemorate the two-hundred-and-twenty-eighth anniversary of our village and to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC.

The natural village²² of Chudonggua, 31 August 2009

Despite the CCDPF project's aim of encouraging the integration of ethnic minority culture and development, villagers under the project chose to deliberately downplay the role of their ethnicity in advertising their cuisines. By using the term *nongjiale*, they associated themselves with farming culture in general, rather than any particular ethnic affiliation. The CCDPF project has made many contributions to communities by introducing new business skills and management capacities and a new respect for their cultural heritage. To the minorities in Guizhou and Yunnan and to local government officials, however, the choice of labeling these ethnic foods as "farmers" foods, rather than as ethnic minority foods, is a particularly significant change. It is quite clear that this naming practice has helped dismantle negative meanings associated with ethnic minority foods and opened up space for the substitution of new, positive meanings attractive to urban customers. The targeted customers are predominantly Han Chinese, who are still exposed to negative portrayals of ethnic foods in the mass media and public discourse. *Nongjiale* terminology, support offered by international organizations for tourism skills training,

and the authority of national government bureaus and administrations have all enabled ethnic foods to begin appealing to Han Chinese consumers.

Nongjiale tourism is communicated through various types of marketing. Since these *nongjiale* restaurants are inescapably located in ethnic minority villages, there must be markers or indicators striking enough to convince tourists that the restaurants are genuine. Perhaps for this reason, there are many formal billboards around CCDPF villages with photographs of UN project personnel as well as plates or tablets with the titles of the UN or CCDPF on them, in conjunction with numerous reports in the local media. The villages cannot be the sole engineers of this kind of purposeful branding. The brand name *nongjiale* and its enterprises, along with the attribution of ethnic identity, are strictly controlled by the Chinese government. It is clear that the marketing of local ethnic cuisines as forms of *nongjiale* could not possibly have taken place without strong local government and state support. Official sanction is an important prerequisite for rebranding restaurants and villages in this way. Additionally, as one villager put it, “the first family to dare to put fish-smelling herbs (a wild edible herb, *Houttuynia cordata*) on the banquet table would have to come from a rich or powerful family, otherwise the host of the banquet would be laughed at for being so poor.” It is clear, then, that there has been strong local government support for this change of nomenclature and marketing strategy. Additionally, although the rebranding process may be seen in some ways as an unintended consequence of the CCDPF project, the CCDPF nevertheless did much to facilitate the changes by providing management skills training in tourism and business administration along with platforms for local produce exchange.

CONCLUSION

A young man in the De’ang village in Yunnan had just returned from the big city to the village to run a *nongjiale* enterprise. He had participated in all the training programs, and the dinner party I was invited to that night was planned as a performance demonstrating what he had learned. The physical surroundings were well prepared; the house looked rural, but still clean and tidy. A space had been cleared in the middle of the cottage yard to make room for a beautifully organized flowerbed and vegetable patch. No cattle shed or pigsty was to be seen. Music was played through a loudspeaker. Before the dinner, villagers performed some local songs and dances for an audience of UN employees, governmental officials from a state ministry, representatives of the provincial and local government, the consultants hired by the UN, and some urban people from the area. The presence of officials from Beijing and the UN (including two foreigners) contributed to the special atmosphere of this performance, making it feel formal and official. Also, unlike the foods in the Dai restaurant in Jinghong described above, the dishes on the dining table in this De’ang village had formed a clear *fan-cai* structure and did not involve any “stinky foods.”

I believe this dinner party was a ritualistic event that came out of a long process of transition. The changes were first catalyzed by the CCDPF project to involve eth-

nic minority culture in development policies in a new way. Along the way, meanings associated with marginal foods in southwest China shifted from negative and “ethnic” to joyful and healthy, connoting the well-being of farmers and the farming life in general.

The CCDPF project officially ended in November 2011, but its influence will undoubtedly last long into the future. Many new questions and problems will undoubtedly emerge; problems involving authenticity, identity, and the potential of losing traditional cuisines. As this study has demonstrated, in the contemporary Chinese cultural context urban consumers have treated and valued unprepared and prepared ethnic foods differently. While today’s urban consumers warmly embrace unprepared ethnic foodstuffs, ethnic cuisine or prepared food can only be promoted by replacing “ethnic” packaging with “farmers’ joy.” This food phenomenon demonstrates that the marginality of ethnic minorities with connections to the “unusual cuisines” of southwest China persists today. With this in mind, the cultural development practice of shifting to *nongjiale* branding in marginal ethnic villages is a thoughtful and strategic option in the current Chinese context.

NOTES

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1. Benglong was the traditional name for the De’ang, which they officially changed in 1985.
2. For example, in Malaysia, by changing the name of a fish the Chinese restaurants successfully turned this previously non-commercial fish into an expensive one (TAN 2001, 146).
3. The strategy adopted by avocado farmers for marketing in the U.S. included setting up an organization of avocado growers and cutting off the connection with Mexican culture by redefining the role of avocados in the modern and healthy life of California (CHARLES 2002). The strategies used by alpaca meat farmers in Peru also included severing the ties between the alpaca and local indigenous people. Alpaca meat had traditionally been the most dependable source of protein and fat for Indian indigenes in the Peruvian Andes. Since the Spanish invasion, it had acquired a reputation as a dirty, hazardous Indian food. Newly organized NGOs took charge of the marketing, and eventually the image of alpaca meat transformed into healthy and desirable fare (MARKOWITZ 2012, 35). This meat has now become a regional favorite, especially among tourists.
4. Chinese food shows important north-south differences and the reasons for this are both cultural and ecological (ANDERSON 1988; ELVIN 2004; STERCKX 2002).
5. *Fan* means the starch staple like rice and *cai* means meat and vegetable dishes. CHANG (1977) found that the *fan-cai* structure was typical to Chinese meals.
6. Disgusting or taboo foods can also serve as boundary markers; see VALERI (2000), WILK (2012), and ROZIN and FALLON (1987).
7. One household was selected by the local community to take charge of everything related to outsiders.

8. The *gu* magic described by Norma Diamond and attributed by the Han to the Miao minority might be another example of this (DIAMOND 1988). There are quite a few foods and foodways in southwest China that sound intimidating to Han ears, such as the “stinky meats,” ant-egg sauce, drinking through their noses—a practice considered unusual by non-minority Chinese, and so on.

9. Namely, fishtail palm flour (*Caryota ochlandra* Hance; Ch. *guanglangmian*). See HU (2005, 301).

10. For example, Xu Xiake was a famous explorer and traveler in the Ming dynasty, and his travel writings have been widely read and studied. He vividly recorded the practice of eating raw fish among the southwestern minorities. One time in Yunnan he was entertained by a local chief with raw meats, which he said he was unable to eat, and only drank alcohol (WU 1991, 176).

11. This pineapple rice (*boluo fan*) replaced the famous Dai dish called bamboo-tube rice (*zhutong fan*).

12. Interview, Jinghong, Yunnan, 28 October 2000.

13. WILK (2012) has discussed the importance of distasteful foods in setting up socio-cultural boundaries.

14. In general there has been very little discussion in the social sciences of the *nongjiale* phenomenon (PARK 2014; CHIO 2014). However, see GRIFFITHS (2009) and GRIFFITHS, CHAPMAN, and CHRISTIANSEN (2010) who relate it to a general shift in China’s consumption habits. We may perhaps trace it back to the “eating bitterness” restaurants with Cultural Revolution themes which emerged in the 1990s and have been described elsewhere; for example, see HUBBERT (2005) and GRIFFITHS (2009).

15. For example, Spain, U.S.A, France, and Japan; see http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=FBHranYri92KZhGkdzaaSF_RWa4CiFLLpz84FhfDW510pMFDWiFehIj7WWJpzIFI (accessed 15 December 2013)

16. Currently, some suburbs of Shanghai have developed *nongjiale* to the extent that they can serve a large number of tourists at any one time.

17. One village called Xihuli in Jinxian, a suburban area of Nanchang city, was under large-scale construction to transform the whole village into a *nongjiale* tourism site.

18. In 2009 in a village in Huangpi, a suburb of Wuhan city, a villager told me that his wife had been offered a good salary to cook at a *nongjiale* restaurant.

19. This is also due to the government’s promotion of scientific farming (farming with hybrid seeds, chemicals, and so on).

20. This is based on information presented in leaflets prepared by these ethnic villages.

21. This is based on information presented in leaflets prepared by Wudong village.

22. A “natural village” is an administrative term in China, referring to a unit below the “administrative village.” It is sometimes translated as “hamlet” or just “village.”

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